Fractured Heart: Locating Puerto Rican Identity and Masculinity in Piri Thomas' *Down These Mean Streets*

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This essay is dedicated to Cruz and Wanda Arroyo. Their love never hinged on their colors. They never tried to be white, and never pretended to be black. They lived as themselves and taught their children to do the same. With love, For the Arroyo family.
“John,” she said, “does it make everyone unhappy when they study and learn lots of things?”

He paused and smiled. “I am afraid it does,” he said.

“And, John, are you glad you studied?”

“Yes,” came the answer, slowly but positively.


**Foreword**

If one were to initiate the project of identifying the experiences of Puerto Ricans in the United States, what better way to begin than with a dark skinned Puerto Rican male on the rooftop of a broken down building in Harlem screaming, “I’m here, and I want recognition”? So begins the autobiography of Piri Thomas, a public intellectual born in New York City’s Spanish Harlem in 1928. Thomas grew up in the shadow of poverty, drug addiction, and communal standard of violent behavior. In 1967, he published his unembellished memoir *Down These Mean Streets,* which dared to expose the duress of rigid community gender norms and explicit internalized racism from his family. Thomas stood at the forefront of the Nuyorican movement, a cultural movement starting in the early 1970s that worked to assert Puerto Rican racial identity and experience within New York City. Thomas’ autobiography marked a milestone in this endeavor to establish and highlight Puerto Ricans in literature, as he became the first Nuyorican to rise to literary acclaim. His text resonated with Puerto Rican readers and Barrio residents alike. He carved out a space in the literary world to establish Puerto Ricans as different, fractured, and present.

As the son of a light skinned Puerto Rican mother and a dark skinned Cuban father (who would come to identify as Puerto Rican upon immigrating to the United States), young Piri Thomas became extremely color conscious within his own family. He notes that he filled the role of the family’s *negrito,* the only dark-skinned child out of 7 children. Thomas’ autobiography demonstrates the way in which his dark skin problematizes his gradual and painful search for self-realization and recognition as an American of Puerto Rican descent. His
writing complicates Puerto Rican identity against a national and Latino community’s indifference towards racial complexity. As Piri moves through different geographical locations, others constantly categorize him as black, denying him access to his true racial roots and flatten out his complex racial and ethnic identity. This constant misidentification fosters a rage within him that prompts him to push back against society’s failure to recognize the heterogeneity inherent to Puerto Rican racial identity. Thomas’ experiences of racial tension further push him to confront the repressed and internalized racial anxiety and discrimination that comes from his own family. Misidentified by his family in particular and the world in general, Thomas temporarily centers his identity around the code of the Harlem streets, proving his “heart” and reputation through fights, drug use, and herd mentality. The process of self-identification that Thomas lays out is carefully constructed through space, each space granting him a chance to contextually address the problems of intersection that emerge.

Taken as a whole, there are a couple of main points that this essay intends to corroborate and clarify. First, Thomas uses his movement through space as a guiding structure to convey his narrative and complicate thematic concerns of race and masculinity that arise in particular sections. Second, Thomas’ autobiography ultimately presents a fractured Puerto Rican identity that resists narrative closure and disrupts the essentialist racial climate he enters. Thomas’ narrative works to present the complications of multiply defined identities (as a dark-skinned, lower income, hyper masculine, Puerto Rican American mistaken as African American) in a way that unveils a larger national neglect of Puerto Rican heritage. The autobiographical subject in Thomas’ narrative appears fractured, meaning that the multiple parts that constitute his identity cannot blend in a productive way that would present a coherent self. If DuBois theorized that the

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1 From this point on I shall mark a distinction between the vantage points of the older and centered narrator Thomas, who revisits these memories to tease out additional meaning, and the younger protagonist Piri, who serves as a visceral site through which these issues are worked through.
perpetual invisible partition of the veil separated the black body from the rest of the world, then Thomas' subject is so cocooned under so many veils of misunderstanding and misidentification that it ultimately disintegrates to the point where this subject channels his rage into a destructive behavior against others and himself. Piri attempts to work through this internalized tension during and after his prison sentence. Yet, after being racially marginalized by society, ostracized from his family, and forced to sustain himself on the corrosive street life, Thomas presents the resulting self-shattering of the subject denied recognition. Only after he accepts the fractured multiplicity of his identity and the emotional sensibility that he hides with his *cara palo* can he begin to embrace a narrative futurity that brings him away from his life of crime and into one sustained through understanding and self-acceptance.

**Section 1: The Barrio Epicenter and Resistance Against Racial Misidentification**

Upon examining the form of Thomas' life narrative, one may note the overlaps that arise between autobiography and traditional English novels of self formation and discovery, known as *bildungsroman*. These genres often utilize movement through space as a tool to mark stages of growth in the narrator's life. The strategic locations chosen by the narrator create a series of critical geographies that help to “examine how subjects are embedded in national imaginaries and in transnational and global circuits of exchange and identification” (Smith 222). Thus, the positioning of the autobiographical subject opens up an analysis of national and global contexts in relation to the process of self-formation. Thomas structures his autobiography through these critical topographical locations as the interactions within them trigger a reconsideration of his ethnic identity while simultaneously highlighting the racial formulation in the US. In doing so, he appropriates a model of narrative growth usually reserved for the white, Anglo-Saxon,

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2 *Cara Palo* is Spanish for a deadpan expression. Thomas uses this expression as a moniker for his masculinity, masking his anxieties and emotions. Figured as the performative male norm in Barrio life, his *cara palo* prevents him from accessing the sentimentality required to construct his own identity against gendered cultural scripts.
heterosexual male in order to reconfigure the potential of space in racial identification. As Thomas moves through different spaces, he is granted varying levels of agency in how he identifies and is identified. Movement away from Spanish Harlem establishes a substantial deviation from the traditional *bildungsroman*. Although movement typically grants the traveler additional room and opportunities for depth and development, the farther Thomas moves away from Harlem, the more the white strangers attempt to use an essentialist binary to flatten his identity, which prompts his own violent backlash. As a dark skinned Puerto Rican, Thomas’ ability to claim his Latino roots vanishes as he moves through Long Island, Jim Crow South, and eventually to Europe. Though others deny him recognition of his hybridity, Thomas uses these interactions to negotiate eventually a complex understanding of his self in relation to the perceptions of strangers and his family. The pattern of Thomas’ travels emphasize a departure from the *bildungsroman* structure in that the development of his character meets harsher resistance as opposed to broadened horizons. Thomas establishes Harlem as the novel’s epicenter and the only location where he may receive recognition and attempt to construct his identity without being circumscribed by preexisting notions of his race. As he moves farther away from Harlem, the racial climate becomes increasing essentialist and forecloses his ability to explore his role as a dark skinned Puerto Rican.

The account of Thomas’ childhood lends itself to a reconsideration of the autobiographical subject and the introduction of historical context. Many of the difficulties in self fashioning faced by a marginalized dark-skinned Puerto Rican boy in 1950s New York emerge from an unacknowledged and almost forgotten racial history that enters a messy network of places, times, and racial attitudes. Given the substantial contribution of geographical location

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2 Yolanda Doub notes that, “when we trace the novel of formation back to its roots in eighteenth century Germany, it is a gender, culture, and class-specific narration of individual learning, self-reflection, and growth” (Doub 2).

4 Granted, Piri’s identity in Harlem will be dictated by a social code of machismo as opposed to a racial binary
in ascribing meaning and depth to Thomas’ life narrative, unpacking this network of Puerto Rican and American histories provides a background on which Thomas can “foreground differences in language, culture, tradition, and history” (Smith 224). Theorist Edna Acosta-Belén traces the fractured lineage of Puerto Rican identity and writing across geographies, generations, colors, and languages.5 Acosta-Belén suggests that a flaw in many approaches to Puerto Rican racial identity is in “considering the Puerto Ricans in the United States as a homogeneous group” (Acosta-Belén 108). Piri Thomas’ own documentary Every Child is a Poet speaks to this claim as it begins explaining the history of Europeans in Puerto Rico. The narrator explains, “Before the United States invaded and took possession of Puerto Rico in 1898, Spain had ruled this Caribbean island for 400 years. The Spanish forcibly mixed their blood with the blood of the indigenous Taino people and the blood of their African slaves. The result was the creation of a unique multiracial people with a multitude of features and colors.” Thus, after the United States took over and prompted a forced economic migration away from the island, this web of Puerto Rican identity spread much further. By the time Thomas begins writing, Puerto Rican identity had come to range over two geographical locations, a spectrum of skin pigments, two generations in two separate locations, and a linguistic range between English and Spanish. These proliferating variations became an issue in the context of the strict American racial binary.

In the United States, Puerto Ricans are incorporated into this country’s economic structure and are thus faced with a society that has historically encouraged the “melting pot” ideology, but which has simultaneously rejected those who are racially defined as non-whites. Since Puerto Ricans are considered non-white by North American racial definitions, they have been discriminated against and have consequently become a marginal group in this society and continue to be a deprived community. (Acosta-Belén 108)

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5 Prior to an encounter with Acosta-Belén, theories regarding Puerto Rican literature and identity held at least two patterns in common. First, they all held at least one sentence that spoke to the lack of scholarship surrounding Puerto Rican literature. And secondly, they attempt to break down, with various levels of success, the different layers of fracturing that result in this diasporic literature.
Puerto Rican racial identity came to be defined in relation to the hierarchical opposition between white and black, prompting immigrants to assimilate. The generation of Nuyoricans that emerged in New York began establishing their racial identities in accordance with this racial binary that generously favored whiteness. As a result, the wide array of Puerto Rican racial characteristics caused divisions in the heterogeneous race, in the process splitting up families and inviting racial prejudice into the household.

It is against this complex historical background that the reader encounters young Piri Thomas on the streets of Harlem, or El Barrio. Thomas’ recollections of racially motivated conflicts during his childhood highlight the extremely limited cultural scripts under which he began to form his identity. The complexity of Puerto Rican history and racial identification become brutally trivialized in the less refined everyday interactions between New Yorkers. Thus, when we witness Piri’s first incident of racist aggression towards his dark skin, he begins to deploy his racial identity in accordance to the black and white binary presented to him. In this time, New York streets were essentially segregated by race, creating little pockets and streets where ethnic groups converged. This sectioning off of areas by race resulted in intense racial tension, especially when the entry of foreign newcomers was seen to threaten the homogenous population. When Piri moves into an Italian block, he struggles to establish his reputation in the face of perpetual racial misidentification:

“Hey you dirty fuckin’ spic.”
The words hit my ears and almost made me curse Poppa at the same time. I turned around real slow and found my face pushing into the finger of an Italian kid about my age. He had five or six of his friends with him.

“Hey, you,” he said. “What nationality are ya?”
I looked at him and wondered which nationality to pick. And one of his friends said, “Ah, Rocky, he’s black enuff to be a nigger. Ain’t that what you is, kid?”
My voice was almost shy in its anger. “I’m Puerto Rican,” I said. “I was born here.” I wanted to shout it, but it came out like a whisper. (24)
Young Thomas recognizes his ability to claim both Puerto Rican and American identities, yet before he is able to make the distinction, the Italian boys preemptively categorize him and prepare to conflate him with African Americans. The Italian children deny Piri access to an entire national history through a sweeping identification of him. One can note that the Italian boys’ use of blackness suggests an erasure of nationality and cultural history. Before blackness is even introduced in the conversation, Piri gestures towards the resentment he feels towards his inherited color. The immediacy of this sentiment signals an underlying repressed issue regarding his father’s struggle with racial identification. His skin color requires him to qualify his race and forces him to deny foreignness by asserting his birth in America and to match the Italian ethnic pride by staking his roots in the Puerto Rican ethnic group and marking a higher place in the unspoken social hierarchy. The suddenness of the conflict paired with the web of racial identifiers shapes his shy and weak response. The effect of his whisper demonstrates the silencing of a black body, overwritten by the gaze and judgment of a white spectator.

Even though Thomas demonstrates how claims to Puerto Rican ethnic identity held the power to manipulate the strict division between whites and blacks, his movement within the space of Spanish Harlem still offers him an opportunity to construct some form of identity. Despite the racial ignorance of the New York street gangs, the cultural capital of the street allowed for the formation of an identity based on recognition and reputation. Thomas’ notions of identity appear tied to the unstable concept of recognition, which invites a tension between the self-recognition of the autobiographical subject and the recognition of the other. The racial dissonance that emerges when Rocky’s gang denies Piri the agency to claim his own racial identity does threaten his street cred. However, after Piri fights with the Italian boys, his

\footnote{This sentiment marks a preemptive strike on Thomas’ reflections on his father. It is unclear whether he curses his father’s decision to move, his father’s dark skin, or his father’s denial of his blackness, thereby not giving Piri a model for coming to terms with it.}
reputation becomes firmly established, allowing for a ceasefire. The hostility of the street seems to arise from territorial disputes and breaches in an unspoken social hierarchy as opposed to blatant racism. He explains that after he returned from his fight that, “I wasn’t blind, and I hadn’t ratted on Rocky. I was in like a mother. I could walk that mean street and not get hurt” (39). Piri’s celebration of being “in” correlates to a set of privileges he earns through combat. One can also note the significance of not “ratting” in the context of Italian gang life. Even when Piri moves back into a block inhabited by Latinos, he still encounters the scrutiny of others. After he brawls with Waneko, the head of this new block’s street gang, he again celebrates his recognition, explaining, “My heart pumped out. You’ve established your rep. Move over, 104th Street. Lift your wings, I’m one of your baby chicks now... I was accepted by heart” (50). The currency of one’s reputation on the street does not depend on a color spectrum. The street valued the performative nature of one’s “heart” and granted reputation and recognition to those who met a criteria based on ability as opposed to color.

Since these bouts on the street serve as an alternative channel through which Piri can begin to develop his identity, the issue of his classification in racial terms does not foreclose his self-fashioning. The recognition that Piri earns through constant turf wars and demonstrations of his macho “heart” loses value outside of Harlem. Once the Thomas family’s economic condition improves, they try to create a new home in Babylon, Long Island, inhabited mostly by whites. Piri’s displacement from his position in his home turf reintroduces a tension between his identity and the racist judgments of the community he moves through. Although typical life narratives involving movement inspire growth through ordeals which grant the subject an “opportunity to form their own opinions and values based on what they learn” (Smith 4), Thomas’ movement highlights the way in which the racial climate consistently narrows his options in terms of racial
identification and overshadows any nuanced understanding he may have regarding his race. If his autobiography aims to establish *El Barrio* as an epicenter for his formative years then the movement further away illuminates the extent to which his racial identity becomes increasingly misinterpreted, merged with blackness, and discriminated against. Piri speaks to a preemptive sentiment of ostracism when he comments that “Long Island was a foreign country ... No matter how much you busted your hump trying to be one of them, you’d never belong” (88). Unlike in *El Barrio*, recognition and fights cannot combat a sense of foreignness. During a high school dance, after a white girl awkwardly avoids Piri’s request for a dance, he overhears her remarking to a group of nameless and faceless students to “imagine the nerve of that black thing” (85). The comment not only misidentifies Piri’s race and dehumanizes him, it also speaks to yet another unspoken social code that has been violated by the new black boy. Even when another student remarks that Piri is Puerto Rican, someone else argues, “There’s no difference,” said the thin voice. “He’s still black.” (86). Suddenly, the Italian boys’ assertion that Piri was ‘dark enough’ to be black evolves to an assertion that he is, in fact, black. These disembodied voices of Piri’s white classmates stand in for what DuBois would classify as “the eyes of others ... which yields [the black man] no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world” (DuBois 5). One can note the beginning of a process that Thomas as narrator opens up for the formation of Piri. Even though the “eyes of others” attempt to overwrite Piri’s identity through simplifying essentialism, Thomas’ narrative builds and resists this denial of self-consciousness. Indeed, so much so that as he moves into the South he matches the levels of racism by becoming more enraged, callous, and self-reflective.

The language employed by the racist high schoolers encapsulates a larger historical narrative surrounding the struggle to define race. Thomas’ travels away from Harlem mark a
struggle against an essentialist notion of race and explicit racism that trigger his process of self-identification. This process of misperception and resistance departs from the growth narrative of the *bildungsroman* by demonstrating the limitations of self-realization at the site of the black body. Movement through these critical geographies offers no room for growth but rather an erasure of a complex set of social, historical, and cultural meanings that make up Puerto Rican racial identity. Piri's desire to travel down into the Jim Crow South and around the world stems from his urge to explore this feeling of blackness and figure out if he is really black. His close friend Brew, a black man who moved to New York from the south, plays a critical role as he constantly renders the inescapability of essentialism in passionately delivered examples:

Yuh think that bein' a Porto Rican lets you off the hook? Tha's the trouble. Too many goddamned Negroes all over this goddamned world fell like you does. Jus' cause you can rattle off some different kinda language don' change your skin one bit. Whatta yuh all think? That the only niggers in the world are in this fucked up country? They is all over this whole damn world. Man, if there's any black people up on the moon talkin' that moon talk, they is still Negroes. Git it? Negroes! (124)

Brew's attitude echoes the sentiments of the high schoolers who merge any type of cultural difference with blackness. He directs his anger towards the neglect of the many people of color of the world who fail to acknowledge their blackness in lieu of their culture. Brew forecasts a preemptive strike on Piri's travels, speculating that the essentialist conceptions of race disregard cultural complexity. The black and white binary constructs this text's racial climate and thickens as Piri moves south and beyond. At the conclusion of his travels, Thomas summarizes that he "learned more and more on my trips. Wherever I went- France, Italy, South America, England– it was the same. It was like Brew said: any language you talk, if you're black, you're black ... I was scared of the whole fucking world" (191). The essentialist gaze of the white spectator

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1 Essentialism may be defined as "the tendency to treat race (or other variables of identity such as those based on gender, sexuality, culture, etc.) as a matter of innate characteristics; that is, as something immutable, discrete, and unchanging" (Ansell 62).
steamrolls the diasporic Puerto Rican black body upon each subsequent interaction further from
El Barrio. Piri’s strained submission to Brew’s theory demonstrates his realization that the
world will not recognize both his dark skin and Puerto Rican heritage. His fear is multifaceted,
gesturing towards his anxieties of not belonging within his family and community, the
emascula tech that goes with being cast as black, and his certainty that he will eventually lash out
lethally against whiteness. His fixation and constant return to El Barrio throughout the text
traces back to this fear and forces him to seek self-referential language and growth in the mean
streets.

Thomas’s text works to demonstrate a gradual acceptance of the fractured and racially
ambiguous Puerto Rican identity, yet he encounters another ‘racially blended’ individual with a
different attitude towards self-formation. Gerald Andrew West is a Pennsylvanian sociologist
who, like Piri, traveled to the south in order to gain personal experience in order to write a book
regarding the “Negro situation”. As a biracial man, he Remarks that his book would aim to
“capture on paper the richness of [black] poverty and [black] belief in living” in order to prove
that “despite their burdens they are working with the white man toward a productive
relationship” (170). Gerald’s introductory comments betray sincerity in his perpetuation of the
fallacy that the static racial climate is improving. In addition, his goal of studying the
paradoxical “rich poverty” seems to gesture that he aims to reproduce common stereotypical
literary tropes of African Americans. Brew especially dislikes Gerald, grilling him on his
affinity towards whiteness. In a very tense moment, Gerald declares, “I have the right to identify
with whatever race or nationality approximates my emotional feeling and physical characteristics
(176). At first, it seems Gerald champions a constructionist notion of race, asserting the

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8 Sterling A. Brown warns that “it is from these last skilful authors, undeniably acquainted with Negro folk-life, and
affectionate towards certain aspects of it, that the American reading public as a whole has accepted the delusion
of the Negro as a contented slave” (Brown 614).
individual’s right to claim any identity they wish based on their social contexts. One has to
concede that it is this very right to self-define that Piri has been repeatedly denied. Thus, when
Gerald finally qualifies his intent to identify as white, Piri sympathizes with him, explaining that
Gerald “was a Negro trying to make Puerto Rican and I was a Puerto Rican trying to make
Negro” (177). Piri reflects on his dynamic and contextual position by acknowledging his
blackness and incorporating it into his fractured sense of self.

However, despite the overlaps between Gerald and Piri’s racial blending, Thomas uses
the sociologist to mount a critique on narratives of passing and the accessorizing of ethnic
identities. Gerald appears as, arguably, the most dislikable character in the autobiography. The
discomfort surrounding his speeches lies in his contradictory and opportunist opinions regarding
his identity. Once it becomes clear that his presence is no longer welcome, his final monologue
highlights both his intent and conceit:

I found out tonight that I am out of place. Not as a human being, but as a member of your race.
I will say that you hit it on the head when you insinuated that I was trying to be a Puerto Rican so
I could make the next step to white. You’re right! I feel white, Mr. Johnson; I look white; I
think white; therefore I am white. And I’ll go back to Pennsylvania and be white. I’ll write the
book from both points of view, white and Negro... That one eighth in me will come through; it’s
that potent, isn’t it. (177)

Gerald’s affirmation of his movement to whiteness through Puerto Rican identity suggests the
ability to move across a racial spectrum at all. His academic rhetoric disguises his
denouncement of his racial blends and his clear bias and hypocritical claims to those blends. He
clings to whiteness for social reasons, yet uses black identity as a means through which to further
the academic and commercial success of his book. The man who at first argued for his right to
choose his race eventually comes to simply align himself with the most advantageous notion of
identity that overwrites his hybridity. In addition, he calls himself Puerto Rican, not out of a
contextual or emotional proximity, but rather as a stepping stone. His sarcastic tone at the end of
his speech even suggests his cognizance of his exploitation. He becomes Thomas’ stand in for the target of Langston Hughes’s reflections on the phrase, “I want to be a poet- not a Negro poet.” Blackness holds no social or emotional value to Gerald, only an exclusive right to the diversity sticker he wants on his book. As Gerald leaves, he abandons his ability to carve out a new space for his hybridity, instead choosing to become the “self-chosen white man making it from a dark scene” (178). Although Gerald can distance himself, both literally and figuratively, from his blackness, the desire to become the ‘self chosen white man’ will prove elusive and degenerative for the Thomas family.

Section 2: Family Racial Dynamics and Triangulated Masculinity

Gerald’s significance in the memoir lies in far more than his parallels with Piri. Rather, Thomas as narrator uses Gerald’s attitude towards race to pinpoint a larger problematic pathology that plagues racially and culturally fractured individuals. Although Piri comes to accept his blackness and acknowledge a global indifference towards his multiplicity, his process of self fashioning requires him to confront the affinity for whiteness ingrained in his family as a racial standard. As noted earlier, the racial climate in the United States forced Puerto Rican families to assimilate along a color line, creating an internalized shame towards blackness that was passed down generationally. Piri’s grandfather and father develop this racial complex and project it onto their children, favoring a narrative of passing over one that confronts and celebrates the fragments that constitute their true identities. Piri is dissatisfied and rejects his family’s racial position, yet cannot avoid the fact that he is a product of this psychological conflict. As a result, Thomas demonstrates that a critical factor in coming to terms with his

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9 His stifling of his ethnic blends through his affinity for whiteness stands in stark contrast to the intent of other culturally blended scholars such as Gloria Anzaldúa, who declares that “if going home is denied me then I will have to stand and claim my space, making a new culture” (Anzaldúa 44)
fractured identity lies in his responsibility to rewrite a generational tradition of passing and reaching for whiteness, even at the cost of his own ostracism.

Thomas attempts to make sense of himself and come to an understanding of his identity on his own terms by performing these internalized psychological conflicts through a series of fights. He begins with his father, who appears as a patriarchal figurehead of black shame. Thomas recounts his father's experience with racial discrimination as a case study for the gradual deterioration of the repressed, ashamed, and never validated individual. As the father sits on his bed, avoiding eye contact with his son, he reports, "I'm not a stupid man ... I noticed how a cold rejection turned into an indifferent acceptance when they heard my exaggerated accent. I can remember the time when I made my accent heavier ... I wanted a value on me, son" (153). Upon coming to America, the father tries to navigate the new racial landscape through a stereotypical performance of Latino speech to distance himself from blackness. Sadly, indifferent acceptance appears as the best he can hope for, yet his rejection of being classified as stupid paints his performance as a strategically planned defense mechanism. Regardless of the plan's efficiency, it appears motivated by an overarching fear and panic regarding self-worth. The extent to which he assimilated to whiteness correlates to his sense of overall identity and fostered an ideology that conflates blackness and worthlessness, so much so that it even becomes codified through his name. He explains, "Sometimes I was asked how come if I was Puerto Rican, I had John Thomas for a name... I'd say, 'My father was so proud to be an American that he named all his children with fine American names.' God, I felt like a puta every time. A damn nothing" (153). The father takes a step backwards to show how his name and racial phobias trace back to his own father's racial anxiety. This confession marks the feigning of

10 _Puta_ is Spanish for whore. The father's very name makes him feel emasculated through its submission to racism.
national pride to disguise an ossified ideology of white supremacy that comes to pervade Puerto Rican racial identity for generations.

This ever-present, unspoken anxiety surrounding race slowly destroys the father’s spirit, drawing attention towards the inevitable dangers of the fractured identity. His own fears of being ‘worthless’ push him to a new realm of ‘nothingness’ through submission to the racial hierarchy. Despite Piri’s best efforts, he will follow suit in this descent into nothingness as his own anxieties transform into crime and drug use. Thomas begins to reveal how the identity of Puerto Rican subjects, under the pressure and limitations of a confusing game of racial assimilation, disperses into a state of numbness that repudiates any identity at all. Gloria Anzaldúa offers a pointed articulation of the strain of coming to terms with one’s racial identity in the face of a land that devalues parts of one’s identity:

Chicano and other people of color suffer economically for not acculturating. This voluntary (yet forced) alienation makes for psychological conflict, a kind of dual identity... We are a synergy of two cultures with various degrees of Mexicaness or Angloness. I have so internalized the borderland conflict that sometimes I feel like one cancels out the other and we are zero, nothing, no one. (Anzaldúa 85)

Like DuBois’ reflections on being black and American, Anzaldúa’s words note the corrosive nature of living and growing under the dual identity, the veil, the psychological conflict, or any of the other terms that describe the pain of a fractured identity. The patriarchal lineage of the Thomas family cannot reconcile their identities in relation to whiteness and blackness, and thus eventually fall into nothingness. The reactionary assimilation and migration of the Thomas family to Long Island demonstrates their attempt to pass and truncate the members of the family that refuse to follow suit. Thus, in the realm of family, Piri cannot celebrate his cultural and racial blends, but rather must contest with a spatial and emotional estrangement sparked by his family’s determination to ignore this internalized conflict through assimilation.
However, Piri’s separation from his family does not begin with a simple exchange of harsh words. Instead, the repressed racial shame that haunted the family for generation comes to a violent head in a climatic sibling rivalry. The two warring ideologies, one that clings to whiteness and the other that acknowledges blackness, become dramatized in a fratricidal Cain and Abel reboot that positions “the disavowed black naked body in the house’s most visibly public room amid tears, blood, and urine” (Cruz-Malave 13). Piri’s confrontation with his brother José replays many of the racial perspectives encountered thus far. José declares, “We ain’t negroes. We’re Puerto Rican an’ we’re white” (145). He stands for the conflation of whiteness and Puerto Rican identity. He flaunts his blond hair and blue eyes while claiming Piri’s skin traces back to some Native American (or Indian) blood. One can note that his reasoning around Piri’s dark skin points to every other race besides African-American. A majority of Piri’s conflicts with his family arise from his insistence on acknowledging their African blood. He refuses to appropriate Native American identity as an excuse for his dark-skin, but rather integrates his color into his identity as he proudly identifies as a “Puerto Rican Negro”. Yet, the comment that sets Piri off relates to his brothers’ excuses regarding his skin color. Piri cries out in disbelief, “You and James hadda make excuses for me? Like for being un Negrito?” (145). José comment implies that Piri’s dark skin burdens the family, calls in question their relation, and must be concealed out of a need to conform to a racial hierarchy. Family relations at this point dissolve into pure unfiltered violence that possesses Piri. The brawl begins in the bathroom and then “the bathroom door flew open and me, naked and wet with angry sweat, and José, his mouth bleeding, crashed out of the bathroom and rolled into the living room” (146). One can note a strategic autobiographical positioning of the black body in relation to the spaces of the household. The fact that the fight moves from the private space of the
bathroom into the public and exposed center of the home gestures towards the eruption of generations of suppressed racial insecurity that has been kept privatized. Within this scene, by depersonalizing the white body to empower his devalued black body, Thomas’ narrative creates a stunning visual representation of the overwrought black Puerto Rican and the confused, uninformed white Puerto Rican. As Piri attacks his brother, he reports that he “saw an unknown face spitting blood at me. I hated it. I wanted to stay on top of this unknown what-was-it and beat him and beat him and beat him and beat him and beat beat beat beat beat” (146). In Piri’s frenzied state, his brother’s body and identity dissolve into something to hate, and stands in for the white other that has objectified Piri his whole life. The repetition of “beat” paired with the movement from outward narrating to inner chant demonstrates a visceral need to overcome racial tyranny. The vagueness of the language also opens up the passage to speculation. Who does “him” represent? His brother? His father? Himself? Up to this point, with so many channels of communication and self-expression limited and even foreclosed, this violent outburst arguably targets literally every obstacle that Piri has had to beat. Once he returns to a calmer state, he finds himself naked, on the floor, in front of his family, in the middle of the house. He claims, “Nobody said anything; everyone just stood there. I said, “I’m proud to be a Puerto Rican, but being Puerto Rican don’t make the color” (147). The disavowed ‘prodigal’ son who represents the family’s deepest repressed fears declares his racial pride while establishing that no color is assigned to Puerto Ricans. His exposed black body becomes the centerpiece of the house, silencing the rest of his family, who potentially out of shock, cannot process or ignore the visceral immediacy of his body and rage.

Up to this point, Thomas’ uses critical geographies and repressed family shame in order to complicate and expose the fractured American-born, Puerto Rican racial subject. Yet, the
thematic concerns surrounding his race, his body, and his relationships to his family and outside world carry over into the construction of his masculinity. The construction of Piri’s masculinity generally hinges on an unofficial code of conduct performed on the streets. As noted earlier, the ability to display one’s “heart” through combat and gang activities operates as the foundation for how others perceive masculinity in this text. Yet, the way in which women and heterosexual relationships are positioned in the construction of machismo opens up a reading into Piri’s racial insecurities and his relationship to his mother. Franz Fanon’s text *Black Skin, White Mask* may enter in this reflection on account of its examination of the connection between black male subjects and white female bodies. Fanon offers lines of reasoning behind this pairing, one based in racist folklore. He revisits the stereotypical search for “white flesh” by the black man, who seeks the white woman in order to elevate his social position and transition to whiteness. He reasons, “I wish to be acknowledged not as black, but as white ... Who but a white woman can do this for me? By loving me she proves that I am worthy of white love. I am loved like a white man. I am a white man” (Fanon 63). Even in France, Fanon notes a type of urgency held by black men arriving from the Antilles to complete this “ritual of initiation into authentic manhood” by sleeping with a white woman. Thus, if one follows this logic, sex with a white woman would serve as a gateway into both a more favorable position in the racial hierarchy and “authentic” manhood, defined here as white heterosexual male.

However, within the context of the American racial climate and Piri’s life narrative, this positioning of the white female body appears incongruent. First, Piri’s travels and family disputes show that he has no intention of assimilating to whiteness. In addition, if one reads “authentic” masculinity in the way Marta Rivera Monclova does, then the code of the street does not lend itself to the production of this kind of masculinity in that it qualifies “queer
heterosexuality, which is to say heterosexual interactions or desires that are not allied to the heteronormative telos of “reproductive futurism” (15). Monclova defines heteronormativity in terms of the straight white male and the nuclear family, with the emphasis here being on the successful reproduction of children. In other words, Piri resists paternity and marriage; he neglects his child and does not consummate his relationship with his girlfriend Trina or marry her. This reappears as not just an isolated incident in Piri’s case but with all his other street friends. Thus, how can one begin to understand Piri’s troubled and violent relationships with white women throughout the text and their role in the formation of his masculinity?

The answer traces back to the figuring of Piri as a product of the internalized psychological fissure that he inherits from his father. Thomas shows that the development of his masculinity becomes intrinsically tied with his race in such a way that his relationships with women become triangulated through another man. The other man who stands in the triangulation with Piri and another woman embodies and reinforces Piri’s racial insecurities. The resulting neurosis forces Piri to try to resolve his competing loyalties through the body of the white woman. Thomas achieves this narrative structure to his masculine self-fashioning by extending Fanon’s notion of the abandonment neurosis. This neurosis traces back to the subject’s childhood, where they “had the cruel experience of being abandoned when he offered himself to the tenderness of others as a little child and hence without artifice” (Fanon 77). The subject’s mother usually produced the sense of abandonment that the subject must then work through as an adult. The resulting logic proceeds as follows. “I have never forgiven my mother. Because I was abandoned, I will make someone else suffer, and desertion by me will be the direct expression of my need for revenge” (75). However, Thomas reconfigures the factors that

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11 Monclova goes on to argue that “the one consistent set of relationships [Piri] pursues actively are his ostensibly non-sexual homosocial interactions” (20). These relationships may be traced back to his sense of belonging in his gang.
constitute Fanon’s formula for the abandonment neurosis. Piri’s relationship with his mother is actually quite good, arguably one of the least strained in the story. Thus, the source of his psychosexual issues in his relationship with women most likely connects to the ambivalence that both he and his father share towards one another. His abandonment ties back to his childhood memories of wondering “if Poppa really didn’t love me” (22). Although Piri hates his father for discriminating against his darker son, as a child he relies on his father’s validation in order to establish his manhood. In a childhood episode after his father acknowledges him, Piri announces, “I was Hombre” (23). Conversely, his father claims, “I love you like I love the rest,” one moment, and then when confronted about his favoritism for his light skinned children concedes “maybe deep down I have” (153). These contradictions and ambivalences become foregrounded in Piri’s relationships as they open the wounds of his unresolved racial marginalization and ostracism.

Throughout the memoir, Thomas phrases his dual identity and social and familial rejection as being “hung up between two sticks”. In addition to being a useful visualization of the binaries between white/black and Puerto Rican/American that he encounters, it also serves as a figure for the triangular structure of his encounters. Piri becomes positioned between the white female body and a man who vocalizes racism against his dark skin. The white female body becomes a place where these racial issues reappear and are worked through in violence. When Piri describes his first sexual experience with a white woman, it occurs immediately after an altercation where white men berate the interracial couple. Set in the middle of an open field, Piri reports that he “made love to her. In anger, in hate. I took out my madness on her. Inside me I kept saying, damn it, I hate you- no, not you, just your damn color. My God why am I in the middle? (90) The rage that Piri exhibited in moments of racial misidentification manifest in this

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12 Hombre means man in Spanish. The father’s recognition serves as Piri’s entrance into manhood.
sexually violent reflection. His emotions toward her become muddied as love, hate, and anger squeeze together. His train of thought performs the erasure of her body as he moves from hating her, then her whiteness, and ends with a woeful reflection on his own body. The confusion and ambiguity that appeared during his fight with José is rehearsed in this earlier scene. Thomas' textual ambiguity maps onto the confusion inherent in living with a dual identity. The slippage in the pronoun “you” marks the multiple ways this passage could be read: He hates the whiteness of the girl. He hates the nameless men who confront his interracial dating. He hates himself and his color for putting him in the irreconcilable middle between blackness and whiteness. The triangulation between Piri, this white girl, and the nameless white men point to a configuration that establishes the complications in the intersections of race and masculinity.

This initial interaction does not exemplify Piri’s ultimate form of revenge that the neurotic would pursue. Instead, that appears in the deep South, namely Texas, where Piri decides to turn the essentialist racial hierarchy against itself. While visiting the deep South as a member of the merchant marines, Piri decides that he will do what Fanon describes as interrupting “the rhythm of the world, to upset the chain of command ... to stand up to the world” (78). He declares his intentions in one blunt sentence. “I wanted to break out against this two tone south; I wanted to fuck a white woman in Texas” (187). The use of the semicolon here does an interesting job of conflating the intent to harm a prejudiced system with sexual relations with a white woman. Thus, the white female body in this text does not serve as an access point to whiteness, but rather is utilized and exploited as a vulnerability of whiteness. By exploiting the figure of the female body as the gatekeeper to racial purity, he suggests that consummation with a white woman would trigger their own racial anxieties, and in turn position them to share his pain. In addition, this act would allow him to reclaim a masculine agency that combats the
emasculating nature of racial misidentification which his father touches on this when he says he felt like a puta, or a whore, every time he lied about his race. Thomas positions the reader to view this moment as one of redemption and a gesture towards generational repair. Piri accomplishes this vengeance by pretending to be a black man posing as a Latino man, revealing to the prostitute, “I just want you to know that you got fucked by a nigger, by a black man!” He uses the illusion of miscegenation to give pain to this nameless woman, who stands in for a racist and essentialist society. The contrast between the woman’s willingness to sleep with a Latino man and outrage when he calls himself black demonstrates the incoherence in the taboo. He “breaks out” against the “two tone South” by threatening the division between the races, employing the South’s racial code against itself while also forcing his antagonists to feel the pain associated with racial blending that he lives with.

While his relations with white women hold and enact aggression and racial shame, his interactions with Puerto Rican women offer him some of the few glimpses of acceptance. Although she does not come into the center of Piri’s reflections until her death, Piri’s mother stands in as a critical component of Piri’s racial identity and familial issues. Thomas distinguishes his mother as one of the few Puerto Ricans whose racial identity does not become predicated on whiteness. When he argues with José, he yells that “there ain’t nobody in this fucking house can lay claim to bein’ paddy exceptin’ Momma, and she’s never made it a mountain of fever like we have” (145). The purity or simplicity of claiming the full complexity of Puerto Rican identity seems implicit within the figuring of Thomas’ mother. Time and time again, she refers to him as her Negrito, one of the few terms which would accurately describe Piri’s dark skinned Latino identity. His mother offers an unconditional racial acceptance and her affection becomes the site where Piri can identify a role and place within his maternally

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13 One may recall here the Piri’s emasculated whisper when confronted by Rocky’s gang
structured family. Once she passes away, Piri’s violent outburst and desperate cries for his mother reveal an unfulfilled desire to relive his mother’s recognition that the rest of the world refuses to replicate, choosing rather to separate his skin color and cultural heritage.

In addition, his relationship to his mother and to his girlfriend Trina also creates a link towards the island of Puerto Rico itself. Geographical locations such as the Barrio, the south, and Europe have all been established in terms of race, but Puerto Rico itself is channeled through the women of the text. Juan Flores writes that “the passage from the immediacy of New York to the Puerto Rican cultural background is generally less geographical than spiritual and psychological [akin to] an almost dream-like trance at the striking contrast between the cultural barrenness of New York and the imagined luxuriance of the island culture” (Flores 187). If life outside the Barrio objectifies and simplifies one’s identity, then the cultural complexity absent in America becomes located in the memory palace of Puerto Rico. The mother demonstrates this early on in the text when she speaks to her children about Puerto Rico. Piri reports that “Moms copped that wet-eyed look and began to dream-talk about her isla verde, Moses’ land of milk and honey” (9). If Piri’s father stands in for the shamefully assimilated black American, then his mother represents a connection to the mythical accepting Puerto Rican community. In addition, when he first meets Trina, the woman of his affection throughout the autobiography, he calls her his “Marine Tiger, after the ship that brought so many Puerto Ricans to New York” (106). Thomas’ affinity for these women makes apparent his gravitation toward a sense of Puerto Rican-ness that his life in America has denied him. Yet, as the memoir unfolds, these channels to his Puerto Rican roots begin to vanish. After his mother passes away and Trina leaves him for

14 Thomas creates a number of maternal figures throughout the memoir that offer him protection. The black woman who protects him from the enraged principal, Waneko’s mother who helps him get clean, and his aunt who support him after jail.

15 Isla Verde means “green island” in Spanish. The mother’s memory of Puerto Rico is enchanted, almost like Eden.
another man, Piri loses avenues left to engage in a sense of community, and goes on to establish an alternative family in the corrosively affirming streets of Harlem.

Section 3: The Street’s Cara Palo, Self-Shattering, and Sustained Fragmentation

Although the self-destructive code of the street will come to round out Thomas’ presentation of the Nuyorican experience, he foregrounds the sense of community that establishes El Barrio as the parallel to the enchanted community of Puerto Rico. When one reexamines Piri’s reaction once Waneko accepts him into the gang, the protecting maternal imagery stands out. Again, Piri rejoices, thinking, “You’ve established your rep. Move over, 104th Street. Lift your wings, I’m one of your baby chicks now” (50). Thomas visualizes street recognition as a mother hen providing shade and comfort to those worthy of her protection. Becoming one of the baby chicks implies joining an alternative street family, defined by a shared experience. Once Piri finds his niche on 104th street, he comments that his crew was “yakking about what we knew about and also what we didn’t, placing ideas on the common altar, splitting the success and failures of all. That was the part of belonging, the good and bad; it was all for you” (54). Thomas presents the communal wholeness that seems to assuage his fractured identity. The gang fills in the gaps of his experience, demonstrating the way in which the collective and the individual merge in a quasi-religious sense. He frames “heart” as the gateway to this community, which stands in as a resolution to his issues with global and familial racism.

However, the necessity to show “heart” and to protect his reputation forces Piri to constantly monitor the way he acts. He explains, “In Harlem you always lived on the edge of losing rep. All it takes is a one-time loss of heart” (51). Although displays of “heart” work as a centering and affirming force for Piri, they simultaneously require the performance of self-destructive behavior. Thus, as Thomas begins to destabilize the sense of community and
belonging that constitute his street life, he returns to the positioning of his identity between two competing ideologies, namely outer performance and inward desire. Thomas pinpoints this conflict by mounting a critique on the machismo of the streets that overcompensates for the need to protect one’s reputation, creating a hyper masculine, violent, and emotionless identity. He demonstrates that an inherent risk of performing this machismo, a requirement for belonging, lies in the jeopardizing and muddying of his masculinity and sexuality. Paradoxically, in order to prove his hyper masculinity, Piri must blur the lines between the homosocial and homosexual, exemplified in his gang’s visit to an apartment filled with gay men.

The scene begins with crew member Alfredo’s proposition, “Let’s make it up to the faggots’ pad and cop some bread” (55). Already, it is unclear whether the gang will exchange money for sex or exchange sex for money. Yet, the vagueness regarding the direction of this transaction accentuates the queering of the hyper masculine subject. The typical slang translation of ‘bread’ would mean money, but bread can also mean sex. However, only a few lines later when Piri reluctantly follows the gang there, he internally screams, “I ain’t gonna screw... not for all the fuckin’ coins in the world” (55). Piri seems to suggest that he will receive monetary compensation if he sleeps with the men. Despite his internal repulsion, he sacrifices agency for a sense of belonging. He reasons, “I don’t wanna go- but I gotta, or else I’m out, I don’t belong in. And I wanna belong in! Put cara palo on, like it don’t move you” (55).

Thomas invites the reader into his internal monologue to present his lose/lose situation. If he goes, he sacrifices agency and opens up his identity to queerness. If he refuses, he loses his reputation and heart. The result is a retreat into his mind and the stifling of his emotions, creating a callousness only penetrated through drug use. Thomas shows that belonging required him to emasculate himself by forfeiting his masculine agency and sexual dominance:
I tried to make me get up and move away from those squeezing fingers, but no good, I was like paralyzed. I pushed away at the fingers, but they just held on tighter. I tried to stop my pee-pee’s growth, but it grew independently. If I didn’t like the scene, my pee-pee did. I couldn’t move” (61).

Piri’s subdued reaction blurs the lines between consensual and unwanted sex, passivity and dominance. His incapacitated body becomes disconnected from his inner self. His passivity in the encounter betrays his macho exterior, as he becomes the paid and passive sexual partner, or the put. Although “belonging meant doing whatever had to be done,” the necessity to prove reputation brings his identity into direct contradiction with the homophobic street environment. Thomas sets up this scene to illuminate a critical conflict in the trajectory of his growth. The outward paralysis that Piri experiences in this moment maps onto the ever present clash between his emotions and his cara palo. Even when his inner voice reasons against his situation, his performative mask overwrites his agency, trading a sense of his true identity for the street identity. This outward and inward clash sets up the conflict that fosters his reliance on drugs.

Of course, the street’s propensity to make people descend into drug addiction does little for the already stressed Puerto Rican psyche. Though in order to cope with poverty, racial subordination, and his muddled sense of identity, Piri develops a dependence of drugs. Thomas’ discussion on drugs and addiction works both to estrange the suffering body and to move into a different space of identity located internally. Since Piri’s outward cara palo performance forecloses access to his emotional sensibility, these moments of drug use and subsequent fantastical dreams gesture towards a desire for genuine human connection. When Piri gets high at the men’s apartment, he dreams of being at an imaginary party where “you keep in time with your whole body and swinging soul, and all of a sudden you’re in the middle, hung up with a

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16 This parallel to a woman problematizes the intersection between race and gender. Marta Sánchez argues that “woman is the antithesis of ‘normal’ Puerto Rican culture; woman thus become equivalent of ‘Negro’” (121). Thus, this moment is particularly strange in the way femininity and blackness surrounds his identity.
chick, and the music is soft and she’s softer... Viva, viva, Viva!” (59). Within his imagination, Piri can come to peace with his body. Suddenly, he reconfigures his feelings towards being in the ‘middle’. The middle becomes a gentle place for connection that makes Piri feel alive. In fact, this drug induced euphoria repeats throughout the memoir, constituting a rupture in the cara palo. Yet, these pipe dreams are but a temporary distraction from his life of crime and identity frustrations. Before he quits heroin, he questions why he made most of his misguided choices on the street. He asks, “All for the feeling of belonging... for the price of being called “one of us.” Isn’t there a better way to make the scene and be accepted on the street without having to go through hell? (204). Piri’s entire life narrative revolves around his desire to become part of the whole, one of the street gang, one of his family members, one Puerto Rican, one human. However, he can only pretend to achieve wholeness through his drug use.

Thus, having been forced to grow physically and emotionally on the mean streets of Harlem, Piri finds his true self layered by his outward performance, the gaze of the white spectator, the shame of his family, and the essentialist cloud that intensifies further from Harlem. The hell of trying to sustain one’s life under the duress of so many layers results in a self-shattering that emerges once Piri shoots a police officer during a robbery gone awry. Thomas sets up this moment by once again strategically positioning his body. Having suffered a gunshot wound, he lays nude on a hospital bed claiming he “didn’t feel ashamed to lay there naked. I felt like a little baby” (237). His dark naked body in the center, open for scrutiny, signals that Piri cannot ignore this pivotal moment in his narrative. The comparison to an infant state harkens back to Fanon’s abandonment theory. The naked body in its most vulnerable state without artifice declares, “I’m nothing” (237). In a moment that recalls Anzaldúa’s sense of being zero and the father’s sense of being “a damn nothing”, Piri rejects his body and his identity. His
fractured sense of self dissolves to the lowest point of existence, where he feels identity-less. At this moment, Thomas presents the ultimate danger of living with a fractured and multilayered sense of self. The utter lack of recognition for his true self fuels his self-destructive lifestyle and breaks him.

From this point, Thomas begins reconstructing himself. Although his time in prison threatens to destroy his last bits of sanity, he survives by adapting the performance of the street. However, only until Piri is granted freedom can he start negotiating and understanding the fragments and structures surrounding his identity. As Thomas’ emerges from jail, the self becomes positioned quite uniquely as he experiences multiple moments of relapse and narrative overlap. Thomas revisits his younger self through others following his same path, and his interactions with them mark how he has changed throughout the autobiography. He meets a young Latino man who was also shot and notes “I was looking at myself 6 years ago” (315). These moments speak to not only a technique of critiquing the self through the other, but also the constant possibility of relapse. As Piri starts to recognize others like him, he turns to religion for assistance. The result stands in stark contrast with the phrasing and theorizing he uses in the earlier sections of his narrative to explain his distress. He comments that he “began to feel better inside. Like God had become Pops and Moms to me. I felt like I was someone that belonged to someone who cared” (317). God takes the place of the deceased mother he cherished and the living ashamed father who rebuked him. He finds his alternative for finding acceptance in prayer, an activity that forces one to meditate inside the self as opposed to worrying about their outward appearance. In fact, when Piri relapses with drugs, he purges his inner suppressed emotions and begins to take ownership and agency over his body:

I pulled away from the mirror and sat at the edge of my bed. My head was filled with pot, and I felt scared. I couldn’t stop trembling inside. I felt as though I had found a hole in my face and
out of it were pouring all the different masks that my *cara palo* face had fought so hard to keep hidden. I thought, I ain't going back to what I was. (321).

Thomas begins to peel away the multiple layers that prevented him from realizing his identity. The mask that he wore to hide his fractured self crumbles away exposing the multiplicity implicit in his identity. However, this rediscovery of emotions should not appear as a rehabilitation of the fractured subject, but rather as a new skill set that prevents his total breakdown. Just because Piri has found power within himself does not overwrite his harsh reality. A reading of the ending not only establishes the story in narrative time, but also grants the reader a look into where this fractured ethnic subject returns and the inescapable and ever present limitations. As Piri sits on the roof with a heroin addicted friend, he compresses his life narrative into past, present, and future:

Everything happened yesterday. Trina was yesterday. Brew was yesterday. Johnny Gringo was yesterday. I was a kid yesterday and my whole world was yesterday. I ain’t got nothing but today and a whole lot of tomorrows... I reached the second landing and heard him call, “Hey Piri, you making it?”...”Yeah,” I yelled back and walked out into the street, past hurrying people and an unseen jukebox beat out a sad bolero. (330)

Thomas relays that the search for himself through others has passed. He no longer needs Trina to take the place of his mother and validate his masculinity. He no longer needs Brew to negotiate his racial identity. He no longer needs his aliases to hide his insecurities and pain behind. He looks toward the present and his future as fresh and continuous, breaking out against the triangulations that have strained his identity. Yet, Thomas ends his novel by reentering the mean streets. He “makes it” out of the squalor of his life circumstances, but he has not and cannot delete the community that he calls home. The end of Thomas’ novel resists narrative closure. The reader is not granted any promises that Piri has accepted his racial identity, that he will leave the *Barrio*, or that he will somehow maintain a moral high ground. Thomas ends his

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17 Paul Ricoeur notes an aspect of narrative time as “*historicality presents the sense of the past in present time as through repetition and memory*”. This model of repetition aligns with cross generational patterns of Piri’s life.
autobiography by closing his past, but presents his fractured, imperfect, dark skinned Puerto Rican self embedded in the dirty mean streets that are the reality of the Barrio.

**Conclusion**

The acclaim of Thomas' memoir speaks to far more than economic success or best-selling fame. Thomas' struggles to make sense of his identity on his own terms against a national narrative of racism and a repressed family history of shame tell the story of an entire community and a whole diasporic race. As Thomas leaves jail, he shows the never-ending doubling of himself; he is surrounded by other versions of himself. The relatability of Thomas' autobiography emphasizes a literary silencing of fractured Puerto Rican identities. In his own style of colloquial prose, he connects his audience to the rigid structures he worked under, the shattering effects on his psyche, and an underlying acceptance of fragmentation. Thomas stood up on the figurative roof of the literary world to demand recognition for Nuyorican, Puerto Ricans, Barrio denizens, and people of color alike. His declaration cascaded as the Nuyorican Movement and this cry for recognition reaches out to this day.

In a pointed moment of his memoir, Thomas writes that “learning made me painfully aware of life and me. I began to dig what was inside of me. What had I been? How had I become that way? What could I be? How could I make it?” (298) Thomas lays out the questions that are universal in spirit yet specific challenges for the Nuyorican experience. These questions echoed through time, entered my head, and planted the seed that grew into this essay. Thomas' fragmentation is my fragmentation. We share the same ambiguous blood mix. My parents shared the street with Piri and I share academia with Thomas. The parallels that Thomas presents and that I catalogue in this paragraph emerge as the essence of living as a dark skinned American of Puerto Rican descent. We may live in different places, speak a variety of different
languages, and look completely different from one another, but we share the same fractured heart. Even if the complicated memory of Puerto Ricans loses out to generational gaps in knowledge, Thomas will forever stand at the top of that building, reminding Nuyoricans in particular and the world in general that we are here. Fractured. Different. Present. Como es, es como se llama. Indeed.

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